

The Resurrection

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"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins". 1 Corinthians 15.17.

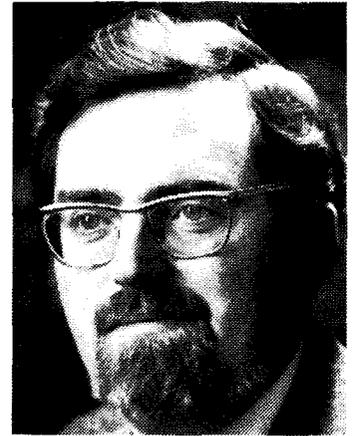
Paul's warning reminder to the Corinthian Church is the natural place to begin any discussion of the resurrection, not least because it is in this same passage that he makes the link between Christ's resurrection and that of believers. We who have not participated in his incarnation, in his transfiguration or in his atoning death; we who will share only in a qualified sense in his ascension, are told by the apostle that the resurrection will belong to our experience just as much as it did to the experience of the human Jesus. Paul does not say that the outworking of our resurrection will parallel that of Christ's anymore than our death is likely to be the same as his. Indeed, much of what he writes on the subject, both here and in 1 Thessalonians 4-5 may fairly be said to be an explanation of how our resurrection will *differ* from his. But however much the details may vary, the principle remains the same. Like Jesus, we will overcome death and share with him in the eternal life of God.

The first point we must bear in mind is the importance of the resurrection for *faith*. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that, of itself, rising from the dead can produce belief in us. Jesus criticised Thomas because he insisted on this kind of proof, but if we desire that today we shall certainly be disappointed. Faith does not come by witnessing miracles, however sensational they may be, but by hearing the Word. In that sense the disciples had a measure of faith before Jesus' death (e.g., Matthew 16:16) but it was not fulfilled even after the Resurrection (e.g., Acts 1.6-7). The Resurrection does not create faith anymore than its absence would necessarily destroy it. There are people today, after all, who profess faith in Christ but who find the resurrection incredible, yet much as the orthodox believer feels inclined to discount such professions, it is doubtful whether he is justified in doing so merely on the basis of the word faith. What the Bible says is not that faith without the resurrection is impossible, but that it is *vain*; it is empty and devoid of content.

The reason for this is also clearly stated in the text. It is not primarily a question of death, though that certainly comes into it, but of *sin*. Without the resurrection we are still in our sins, a statement which can only mean that the atoning work of Christ is not complete without the resurrection. Here we face a challenge to our traditional Protestant outlook. How often have we heard it said that Christ's words on the cross, *It is finished!* point to the completion of his atoning work, as if from that moment onwards the whole work of reconciliation has been accomplished? How often have we concentrated so strongly on a *theologia crucis* that we have neglected a *theologia gloriae*, failing to perceive that these are two sides of the same coin? It is no disparagement of the crucifixion to say that even Christ's sacrifice would have been in vain had he not risen from the dead, had he not demonstrated with power that he has not merely paid the price for sin but has also overcome it!

Of course, statements of this kind run the danger either of appearing to be too obvious or of denying some aspect of Christ's atoning work on the cross. These dangers are real, and they must certainly be avoided if we are to present a balanced picture. But the resurrection must not be allowed to fade into the background, almost as a kind of anticlimax. Christ's suffering and death were not ends in themselves; they led inevitably to *victory* over the power of sin

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and to a new life in the eternal love of God. The Christian message is one of hope in life out of death, and this emphasis must never be lost, even as we give the appropriate weight to other aspects of Christ's saving work. Without the resurrection our faith is vain because we have no hope left, nothing to point to as the fulfilment of our present life of trust and obedience. As human beings we are in desperate need of deliverance from sin — what could be more tragic than if we were to put our faith in someone who has promised us this but then turned out to be unable to keep his word?

The resurrection of Christ cancels out the power of sin and death in a way which nothing else ever could, and it rightly receives the chief place of honour in our worship and in our preaching. But in wiping out the effects of sin, the resurrection does not automatically take away all trace of suffering. When Jesus appeared to Thomas, he asked him to touch his hands and side, where the marks of the wounds were still plainly visible. We must not go to the extremes of a certain macabre form of piety which says that the wounds were still open, and that they remain in eternity as fountains of Christ's blood pouring out to wash away the sins of men. It was against such a distortion that Calvin protested in his commentary of Luke 24.13-35. According to him, the men on the road to Emmaus would certainly have recognised Jesus straightaway if he had still borne the marks of his passion; the fact that they did not know him is for Calvin an indication that the marks were no longer there!

It is always dangerous to argue from silence, and it would appear that Calvin's desire to avoid a particular abuse pushed him a little too far in the opposite direction. The marks of Christ's wounds have no saving significance in themselves but they are important for what they tell us about suffering. Bearing in our bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus is part of our enjoyment of the first-fruits of the Kingdom (II Corinthians 4.10). Paul cannot possibly mean by this that we are helping to earn our own salvation since that would contradict the whole tenor of his Gospel message. What he means is that suffering is part of our *glory*, one of the privileges we have in fellowship with Jesus. Today we are in serious danger of preaching a Gospel of ease and comfort, in which the resurrection is seen as automatic deliverance from all pain. That may be true

eschatologically, in the sense that when *we* rise from the dead our troubles will be over. It is most emphatically *not* true however, of the relationship between the risen Christ and us, who continue to labour as the Church militant. There is a suffering for us to endure still, so that the life of Christ might be spread abroad in the world. In rising from the dead Christ did not destroy all memory of his suffering; rather he held it out as an example for us to follow in the work of spreading the Gospel.

The resurrection of Jesus is portrayed in the New Testament as the beginning of an interim period which culminated in his ascension 40 days later. The symbolism of the 40 days will not be lost on students of the Scriptures, but it is not the most important point here. We are concerned rather with the fact that this middle stage between earth and heaven is a fact of Christ's life which is not paralleled in ours. When he returns at the end of time, we are told that the dead will rise first and that those who are still alive will meet him in the air. Expressed in theological terms, this means that for us the resurrection and the ascension will be a single event, which quite clearly they were not in the case of Jesus. Why not?

Here we must consider what happened during the 40 days which intervened between the two events. First there is the *appearance* of Jesus to his disciples. The Gospel records have sometimes been discounted on the ground that he appeared only to believers, not to those outside his circle, though the case of Thomas ought to suggest that not all of Jesus' associates were prepared to swallow such a tale without critical examination. Mary Magdalene may conceivably have been in a state of hysteria in the Garden, as Michael Goulder suggested in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, but even if she was, there is no indication that it was catching — especially not over a period of 40 days! Had Jesus appeared only once to one person, or in exactly the same way to two or three people, there would be considerable ground for suspicion. But the sheer variety of his post-resurrection appearances makes the idea of a collective hallucination exceedingly improbable, to say the least! It is also important to note the fine balance in these appearances between the human and the divine. Jesus is capable of appearing and vanishing at will, which rules out any theory of resuscitation along the lines of Lazarus, but at the same time he can eat and can be touched, which forbids us to think in terms of a mirage. Both theories have been advanced as alternatives to belief in the resurrection, but neither can account for the evidence as a whole.

The second point concerns the post-resurrection *teaching* of Jesus. For some reason we are not accustomed to looking at this in detail, but it is extremely important in its own right, because it was during this time that he laid the foundation for the Church. First of all, there is the incident recounted in Luke 24 of the meeting on the road to Emmaus. Jesus expounds the Scriptures, giving them the Christological hermeneutic which he had already claimed during his earthly ministry (John 5.39). He concludes this exposition of the Word by a repetition of the Last Supper, in which he was recognised by the disciples — a paradigm of the relationship between Word and Sacrament which the Church was charged to maintain.

During his 40 days on earth, Jesus also lays to rest speculation about the nature of the Kingdom. The disciples had been told any number of times that Jesus' Kingdom was not of this world, but after an event like the resurrection it is understandable that some of them might have felt that earlier warnings no longer applied. Yet Jesus reinforces his earlier teaching on the subject and reminds them that the final consummation of all things remains a mystery concealed in the mind of the Father (Acts 1.7).

Instead of promising an immediate parousia, he gives his disciples very specific commands, which as we now see, lie at the heart of the Church's mission. These commands, which are recorded for us in Matthew 28:19-20, have frequently been regarded by scholars as inauthentic on the ground that they contain a developed form of teaching, especially about the Trinity, which would have been impossible at the beginning of the Church's ministry.

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In response to this it can be pointed out that Jesus' basic command to preach and to baptise, is one which he has carried over from his earlier ministry. The difference is that the content of the preaching will now have been greatly increased, since in addition to the message of forgiveness there is the added promise of deliverance. This increase in the content of the message is reflected in baptismal practice. The use of the threefold name may appear to be unusually early, but we know that later Trinitarian doctrine grew out of baptismal practice and was not imposed on it. This raises the question of where baptism in the threefold name may have come from, if not from Jesus himself. People who suggest that the Trinity is a complicated philosophical construction borrowed from various forms of Middle and Neo-Platonism have not reflected adequately on this phenomenon. Nor have they given sufficient consideration to some of the evidence which can be found in Acts, e.g., 8.15-17, where the point is made that baptism in the name of Christ *alone* is insufficient.

Taken as a whole, Jesus' post-resurrection teaching must be seen as a repetition and confirmation of his pre-resurrection message, not as a new departure brought about by the change in circumstances. This in turn reinforces our belief that his death and resurrection were not accidental, or unknown to him before they happened. On the contrary, they appear to be the logical fulfilment of the whole dynamic of his teaching ministry. This is the standpoint of the Gospels, of course, though they may be accused of a certain post-resurrection bias. The fact that the basic pattern of witness remained unaltered though tells a different story. This strongly suggests a deep-seated continuity between "before" and "after", which in turn can only mean that the whole thing was planned from the beginning.

As Christians today it is vitally important that we rescue the resurrection from theological oblivion and restore it to the centre of our life and witness. Too often we have stopped with the *evidence* for its occurrence and neglected its deeper *meaning*. May God grant us wisdom to restore this aspect of his truth to its proper place so that we and the whole Church may recover something of the joy and wonder which the disciples must have felt on that first Easter morning.